
Aftermath: Women and Women's Organizations In Postconflict Bosnia and Herzegovina



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Summary

FROM 1992 THROUGH 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina was embroiled in a brutal war. The origins were rooted in a complex web of power politics, economics, and territorial ambitions in which ethnonationalist propaganda was used to divide and conquer. The result was countrywide devastation.

Two interrelated atrocities became hallmarks of the war: “ethnic cleansing” and the systematic rape of women. Ethnic cleansing was a process whereby towns were “purified” of the other ethnic groups through forced eviction and execution. Rape was used as a means of facilitating this process by instilling fear into the community and forcing out its population. The demographic, social, psychological, and physical chaos caused by these combined strategies is the most horrifying and enduring legacy of the war.

The carnage finally ended with the December 1995 signing of peace accords, brokered in Dayton, Ohio. But the war had brought devastation to virtually every sector, from the economy to the social fabric of local communities. It had claimed 250,000 lives (mostly men)—nearly 6 percent of the prewar population of 4.3 million. One million Bosnians had fled the country and another million were internally displaced at the end of the war.

One of the most significant and lasting outcomes of the war was the way in which men and women responded. While most men were drafted or volunteered for the army, women reacted to the crises around them

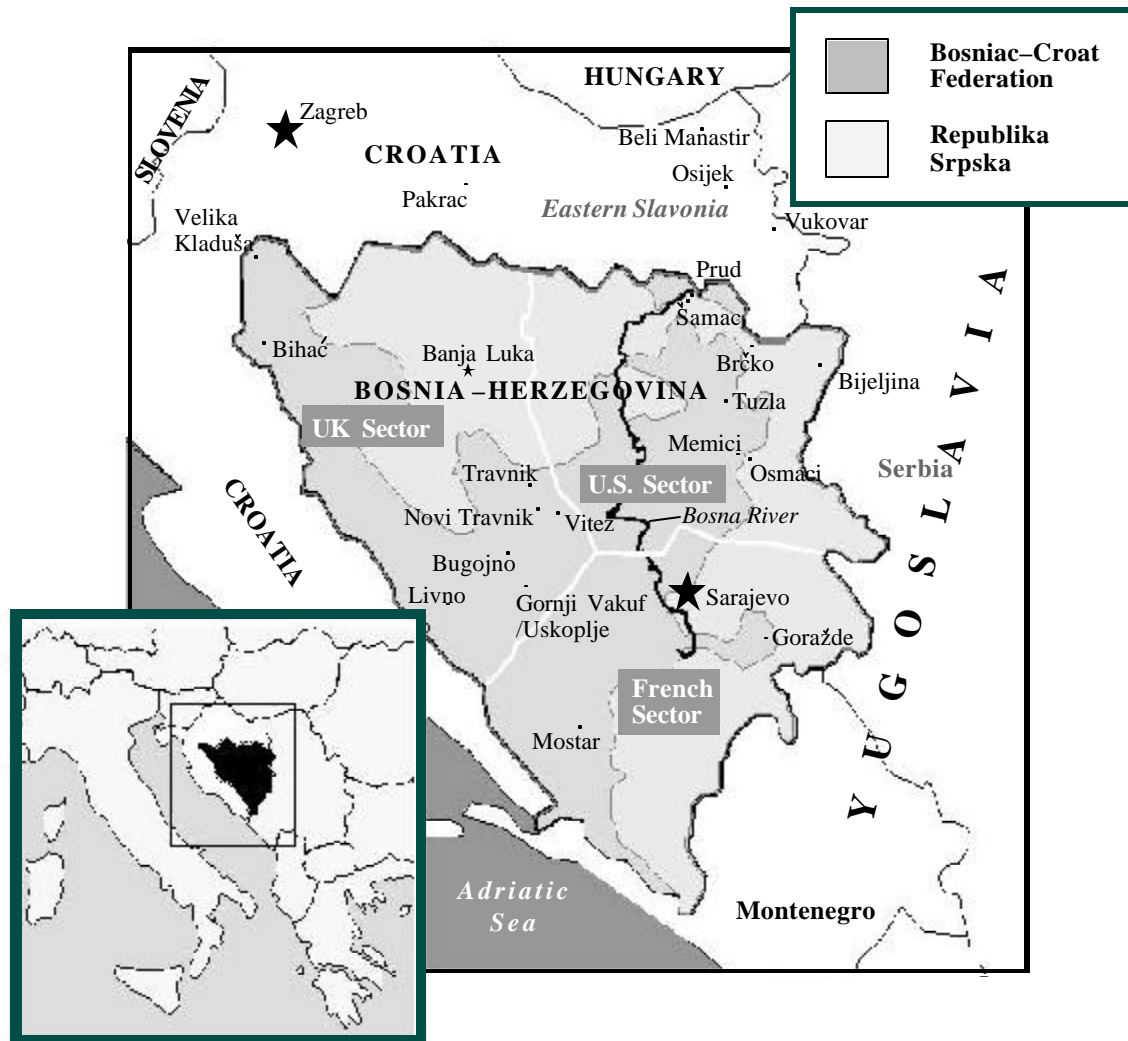
in many cases by forming groups that provided a range of services from food distribution to counseling.

Over time women's organizations, with the encouragement and support of international donors, evolved. They are now engaged in the sectors of democracy and human rights, microcredit and income generation, education and training, and health and psychosocial support. Through their varied activities they have raised morale and living standards as well as gender consciousness.

Funding is the current challenge facing women's groups and all other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Bosnia-Herzegovina (commonly called simply Bosnia). A process of “development Darwinism” is likely to begin soon—with the weakest or least financially favored falling by the wayside. Still, those that have exhibited determination, independence, and imagination are likely to survive to remain at the forefront of NGO movement in Bosnia.

Gender-Related Effects of the Conflict

The way men and women experience and deal with the consequences of conflict depends on gender roles and relations before the conflict and how they were renegotiated during wartime. Other factors such as ethnicity also can determine the responses of both men and women in a postconflict situation. In some



MÉLANGE OF PEOPLE IN A PATCHWORK LAND. One of the world's most ethnically diverse countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina (commonly called just Bosnia) has a population consisting of ethnic Muslims, Eastern Orthodox Serbs, and Roman Catholic Croats, to name but the three most prominent. Bosnia and Herzegovina broke away from Yugoslavia in 1992. The nation suffered civil war through

1995, when the United States brokered the Dayton Peace Accords. Bosnia today comprises two entities created at Dayton: the Bosniac-Croat Federation and the Republika Srpska. British, French, and U.S. forces patrolled their respective zones as a joint peacekeeping force during the first several years of transition.

cases, differences *within* genders will be as significant as—if not greater than—differences between genders. Ethnic tension and a scarcity of resources may in fact lead to competition between women. This is certainly true in Bosnia, where class, ethnicity, and residential status are pivotal elements in determining a woman's position and have proved to be a source of conflict between women and within women's organizations.

Still, striking gender-based effects of the conflict are evident in demographics, the economy, health, and politics.

The war left half of the population displaced. Displacement is traumatic for both men and women, but it may be more so for women—particularly those from rural areas where they were the sustainers of the home, the center of women's lives.

The war moreover appears to have imbalanced the sex ratio and age structure. It is estimated that women now constitute between 52 and 60 percent of the population and that between 16 and 20 percent of households are headed by women. Statistics also indicate increases in the dependent population of the young

and old but a significant drop of nearly 10 percent in the productive-age population. All together, this suggests a markedly increased economic and domestic burden on women.

The postwar economy has not been kind to women. As workers, they face high unemployment and gender-based discrimination. As household managers they are faced with rising costs of previously provided services such as health care and education.

Consequently, women's health concerns have been left unaddressed. Women's mental health had been a primary area of assistance during the period immediately after the war, but interest waned thereafter. Significantly, men's mental health issues have been avoided. Among the neglected health concerns of women is violence against women, which cuts across all sectors. Some evidence suggests that the incidence of such crime, particularly domestic violence, is on the increase.

Politics, however, is one of the areas in which women are successfully fighting back the negative gender-related effects of the war. The number of women representatives increased dramatically following indigenous efforts to impose a quota and a campaign in women's voter education, funded by USAID and assisted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Women's Organizations Emerge in Bosnia And Herzegovina

Before the war, NGOs did not exist per se in Bosnia. One reason for this was that the government had provided all necessary services. When the humanitarian disaster created by the war exceeded the capacity of the government to meet the needs of the people,

the vacuum was filled largely by women. Funding for the activities of women's organizations was provided by the international community.

The first women's organizations consisted of volunteers who provided emergency food, clothing, and shelter for refugees, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups. Now the activities of women's organizations fall into four broad categories: 1) democracy and human rights, 2) education and training, 3) microenterprise and income generation, and 4) health and psychosocial support.

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Democracy and human rights. Of the four categories, those linked to democracy number the most. For these organizations, commitment to democracy and human rights began before donors began providing significant funding for such work. Activities undertaken by women's groups in this area include roundtable discussions, advocacy campaigns, media spots, free legal aid to women, and

the production of educational materials on rights issues.

Education and training. There are fewer programs in this sector than there were a few years ago. However, these programs remain important for women without formal education as a means to acquire marketable skills. The training offered includes sewing and knitting as well as computer, foreign language, and secretarial skills. There are concerns about whether this type of training is marketable and whether it gender-types women. The results appear to be mixed and tend to vary according to other program components such as résumé development and job placement.

Microcredit and income generation. Some women's organizations are providing microcredit to women borrowers, of which displaced women and female-headed households are the primary target groups. Loans, which range between 1,000 and 5,000 deutsche marks (US\$550–2,750), are largely provided on a solidarity group basis.

Health and psychosocial support. Few women's organizations are addressing general health issues. While some continue to provide psychosocial counseling, the number doing so has declined noticeably since the immediate aftermath of the war. One of the first women's NGOs in Republika Srpska that provided psychosocial services is now in danger of closing altogether. The programs that continue to function in this area are those that have built a reputation in this field and widened their networks to secure funding.

Foreign Assistance Given To Women's Organizations

International assistance to Bosnian women's organizations has taken a variety of forms, including direct cash grants, microcredit, and training. In general, most cash grants have been accompanied by training in management, fund-raising, advocacy, microcredit, and proposal writing.

Most of the cash grants are earmarked for specific projects. Few cover general operating costs. The largest funding institution devoted to women's projects is the Bosnian Women's Initiative, which provides grants for, among other things, a partial salary subsidy. These grants are largely geared toward covering equipment or production costs. The Swedish organization Kvinna till Kvinna ("Woman to Woman"), however, supports a small number of women's organizations with the general aim of increasing women's voices in society and awareness of women's rights. Similarly, the Delphi International/Star project, sponsored by USAID, provided direct grants of between US\$5,000 and \$50,000 to advocacy-related organizations. It also supported broader projects, such as workshops, conferences, training sessions, and regional activities.

Microcredit programs are widely supported throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina. Those that target

women, though, are generally at the low end of the loan market. Women receive less than 26 percent of all microcredit grants. The average loan size is 20 percent higher for male borrowers.

Training has been aimed both at the organizational level and at individuals within organizations. Organizational training (or institution building) concentrates on NGO development, capacity building, fund-raising, and advocacy. Several different agencies provided these sessions, and women's organizations that had taken part in them noted the importance of the support. Given that the whole concept of NGOs was new to Bosnia, the training was vital if organizations were to survive and grow after international assistance ceased. For individuals, training has been geared toward building confidence by developing leadership, advocacy, and media skills.

Areas of Tension Between Donors and NGOs

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Women's organizations have generally expressed enthusiasm over the support provided by the international community. However, they were also able to identify some difficulties they have had with donors. Among them:

■ *Lack of coordination among donors.*

This has resulted in ineffectual programming. To address the problem and facilitate a dialog on gender issues, a coordinating group has been established under the auspices of the Office of the High Representative.

- *Inappropriate donor agendas.* Some of the better funded women's organizations have been able to reject donors (including USAID) that have approached them with projects outside their intended scope of work. Less financially secure groups are more likely to succumb to such pressure. The pace at which the agendas change prevents continuity and proficiency in a given area.

Moreover, it fuels competition for funds and restricts the ability of organizations to specialize in a particular area. That impedes the development of a broad range of services that could be provided by NGOs in general.

- *Inappropriate development models.* Some agencies have attempted to apply in Bosnia project designs developed elsewhere in the world without duly considering contextual and cultural differences.
- *Poorly prepared donor staff.* The leaders of some women's organizations observed that the staffs of some donor agencies arrived in Bosnia with only limited understanding of the country's history or culture. Indigenous staffs found this level of ignorance requires that they provide history lessons before explaining the content of the project.
- *Lack of vocal support.* Some organizations would have liked to have greater public acknowledgment by USAID of the contributions women's organizations have made in supporting democracy.

Levels of Funding: Less May Be More

It appears that large-scale, high-profile, well-funded projects may be less successful than smaller initiatives. The Bosnian Women's Initiative is an example. When it was launched as a \$5 million fund for women, the ensuing chaos in establishing operational strategy and selection criteria resulted in fierce competition among women's organizations and in weak, ill-conceived projects. The motive seemed to be to engage as many women as possible under the grant. Since then, the approach has been scaled back and decentralized. The maximum number of beneficiaries per project is now about 25, which appears to better promote sustainability.

Meanwhile, smaller scale funding umbrellas appear to have achieved more with less. Funding has been concentrated on a few pivotal groups, but general funds have also been available to support the wider network. The flexibility of the funding, it appears, has been more significant than the amount.

Into the Future: Continued Reliance On Foreign Assistance

The state of the economy and the legal infrastructure bode ill for most indigenous organizations. Indeed, a process of "development Darwinism" is likely to begin soon. That is, the strongest NGOs will survive, while the weaker ones will either fade away or join other groups. Because a number of women's organizations have established links with international women's groups and developed supporters outside the donor community in Bosnia, they may be more likely to withstand the inevitable withdrawal of funds. Local funding is difficult but not impossible. For many, however, the funding hurdles to come will be decisive.

Impact of Women's Organizations

One can view the impact of women's organizations at the micro and macro levels. The most significant and tangible effects are perhaps at the micro level, where differences are made to individual lives. Microcredit projects have saved women beneficiaries and their families from destitution, replacing coping strategies with livelihoods. Activities at the micro level have instilled confidence in many of the beneficiaries, putting them in a better position to pursue other economic and personal endeavors.

In psychosocial rehabilitation, too, the results can be dramatic. Women who have received counseling as well as help with vocational studies and other matters have been able to return to their communities with new skills and confidence.

At the macro level, women report that women's issues are being discussed more openly and regularly. However, social barriers to women's equality remain. Even among vocal women's groups, some observers have noted a lack of gender awareness or sensitivity in their being able to define gender issues. For example, the president of a women's organization in the town of Banja Luka expressed discomfort with "feminist ideas" and the implicit emphasis placed on opposition between women and men. She also felt that women's rights were secondary to broader human rights issues.

Still, some groups of women in need of assistance have not been reached. Few if any organizations are addressing the situation of Roma (Gypsy) women, who were among the most vulnerable populations before the war. Much assistance is targeted at female-headed households, but it appears to be directed primarily at war widows or those with missing husbands. Anecdotal evidence suggests that divorcées are not among this target population, even though they may be as vulnerable as women with dead or missing husbands. Alimony laws exist but are seldom enforced. Thus, divorced women may find themselves without housing or the means to feed their children.

Selected Observations

There is no doubt that international assistance has been critical in improving and even saving the lives of many women during and after the war in Bosnia–Herzegovina. It has also contributed to an increased awareness of gender issues through the funding of studies and advocacy campaigns, particularly those seeking increased political participation for women. However, as illustrated here, there were a number of missed opportunities and many lessons to be learned from the experience of providing assistance to women’s organizations in postconflict Bosnia.

A salient observation follows from the truism that assistance that targets women is channeled largely

through women’s organizations. This stems from the war effort in which women constituted the majority of beneficiaries and ran many of the assistance-delivery organizations. It also reflects the tendency of women-run organizations to reach out to women. In that sense, it has enabled the inclusion of a greater number of female beneficiaries.

But women-run organizations have in some cases been pigeonholed in providing humanitarian or other “soft” aid. In the postconflict era, the impact of humanitarian assistance is overshadowed by more lucrative infrastructure and other construction-related projects operated primarily by men. Simultaneously, making women’s organizations wholly responsible for women’s needs relinquishes male-run and international organizations from the responsibility of including women or considering gender issues in these activities. Such a division makes introducing gender awareness more difficult.

Moreover, channeling aid to women through women’s organizations does not necessarily result in empowering women at the grass-roots level. Few women’s organizations in Bosnia were able to make the link between aid and empowerment. Those that did emphasized concepts of ownership and self-help. Aid alone is not sufficient to induce empowerment. A holistic approach is needed to address institutional and societal as well as economic hurdles to the advancement of women.

This Highlights, by Ross Bankson of Conwal Incorporated, summarizes the findings of Working Papers Nos. 302 and 308, “Aftermath: The Impact of Conflict on Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” and “Aftermath: The Role of Women’s Organizations in Postconflict Bosnia and Herzegovina,” both by Martha Walsh, of the International Center for Research on Women. To access this Highlights or the longer documents from the Internet, key in www.info.usaid.gov. Click on [Publications/Partner Resources](#), then on [USAID Evaluation Publications](#).
